

Smoking crack

For nine years my next-door neighbor in the hills overlooking Los Angeles was an honest-to-god rock star. I just knew him as Robbin, but to the fans of his band "Ratt", he was a celebrity, selling 8 million albums and with a hit song "Round and Round", that you would probably recognize. Although physically massive at 6'6", he was sweet and funny. He would end up dead way too young, but I didn't know that yet. I also didn't know he was a heroin addict.

We met when we both bought our homes in 1986, and he was at his peak: worldwide concert tours, tons of money, house in the Hollywood Hills, Playboy Playmate for a wife (Laurie Carr, Miss December '86), Ferrari in the driveway. Sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.

I was a busy commercial photographer, and he was quite often in the studio or on the road, but we still found moments to hang out. A couple of times he had a vacation planned with his wife, and for some reason or another she couldn't go, so I went with him once on a trip to Hawaii, and another time to Cabo. He was one of those people who could absolutely destroy a hotel room within minutes: clothes and stuff just strewn everywhere.

Robbin was also very generous. When he found out I had an interest in playing bass guitar, he bought me one and said it was a present for being in his wedding. He patiently wrote out every note of the fretboard and showed me how to play along with some basic rock 'n' roll tunes. He loved the Rolling Stones and we learned how to play some songs together. I think he liked that I didn't live in his world and really had no concept of him other than as a neighbor and friend. I did go to a concert once when they played in our area, and it amazed me to see the devotion of their fans to the band and to the heavy-metal music that never resonated with me. It was another world.

I remember him as a gentle giant, and a great cook who loved spicy food. He would say "if your forehead's not sweating, it's not hot enough". He had a big laugh and was a lot of fun to be with, but when I look back on it now, I realize he was doing drugs and I had no clue.

I've never been the type of person who is easily addicted to anything. I tried cocaine a couple of times, and all I could think afterwards was, "that cost a hundred dollars!?".

Robbin assumed I'd become addicted, so he was protective of me when it came to drugs. He rented a houseboat on Lake Powell once and I went on the weeklong trip along with some other friends. I found out they had some LSD and said I wanted to give it a try. Robbin cautiously gave me a small amount, and although I never

experienced what I would consider "tripping", I did find myself on the top of a hill, naked as a jaybird, singing and waving to everyone down below. I guess it did have some effect.

In later years I noticed something was wrong. He seemed less interested in going out to our favorite Mexican restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, "Mi Compadre". The albums weren't selling as much, tours not as full; he was more moody and aloof. As someone who always struggled with his weight, he was getting bigger. One day I noticed his wife was no longer there. He got fired from the band and his life was unraveling. It was at this time I found out that he had been in and out of rehab several times. Robbin was raised in a good family in the wealthy town of La Jolla where he was a surfer and learned to play guitar. I only met his family once, when I was at Robbin's wedding on a big yacht. His dad wrote several books about the ancient cave drawings in Baja, Mexico which I eventually got to visit. I know his parents and sisters cared deeply about him, and tried to help as much as they could, but after a certain point they just didn't know what to do.

In some ways Robbin just seemed too sensitive for this world. He would get sober for a while and then have some small setback or hear of someone's death, and then he would hide his sadness or frustration in drugs again. It was a cycle he seemed unable to break.

Robbin was running out of options and running out of money. He lost his license and his car, and he would have me drive him to the local pawn shop to deliver yet another one of his prized guitars in an exchange for a hundred bucks. It was terribly sad and I felt so helpless. He would occasionally show a sense of humor and tell me some celebrity rehab story with Sam Kinison or Corey Feldman, but those times were few. I remember at one point he came over to excitedly tell me that he had kicked heroin. When I asked him how he did it, he said that he was smoking crack instead.

I think he was doing it because it was less expensive, but the worst part was that it made him increasingly paranoid. He would walk into his house and be absolutely certain that there was someone in there, so he would call the police. You've gotta be pretty high to do that.

I'm not sure if it was just out of curiosity or as a chance to bond once again, but I asked if I could smoke some of this mysterious substance with him. Again, compassionate and cautious, he was afraid that I would become addicted, so agreed to only give me a small amount.

I had two lawn chairs on my patio and we sat down on them one evening with a beautiful clear view over the city of Los Angeles in front of us. He had a little glass pipe and placed a few white, crumbly rocks on top. He lit them, taking a long drag, and the rocks glowed in the night. He allowed me to have just one small puff and

then we laid down to let the show begin. I felt a quick rush of high to my brain and distinctly remember my toes curling and uncurling over and over again inside my shoes. I felt unwilling or unable to stop it. There was no paranoia or bad feelings at all, as I knew I was with a friend who would take care of me. The buzz was strong and pleasant, but when it was over, fortunately, I had no desire to do it again.

I moved away in 1995, so I didn't have to be there to see him evicted from his home. With no cash, nowhere to live and a family no longer willing to give him money, Robbin became a ward of the state. He had contracted AIDS from sharing needles, and now, hugely obese, he was, for all practical purposes, confined to bed. Through a mutual friend, I found out where he was and called him. We recognized each other's voices after all those years, and after some catching up, I told him that I was afraid my call would be too late and that he would be dead. A great sense of humor to the end, he quoted Mark Twain and said, "the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated". He passed away not long after that at the age of 43.

His fans have a Facebook page in his honor with photos and stories, and almost 5000 members.

Twenty years after his death, I was able to visit with one of his sisters, express my condolences and share memories. The dead are gone, but the family and friends live on, always wondering if they could've done anything to help, anything at all so he would still be alive.





